



the
ASSASSIN

and the
PRINCESS

a CROWN OF MIDNIGHT exclusive scene

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The Assassin and the Princess

Sarah J. Maas

A Throne of Glass short story

The midwinter day was warm enough that Celaena Sardothien didn't bother with gloves when she set out into Rifthold.

Princess Nehemia however, was thoroughly miserable. Still, she declined Celaena's repeated offers to take a carriage to the most fashionable avenue of the capital city. Traveling by carriage would only make the day go faster, the princess said. And since they'd claimed the day solely for enjoying each other's company, neither young woman was in much of a hurry to see it quickly end.

So they walked through Rifthold, dressed as finely as they could while still being warm—and remaining relatively unnoticed. They took their time crossing the city, though they had an unspoken agreement not to venture near the docks, warehouses, or anywhere they might run into any living proof of Adarlan's empire—and brutal conquest of the continent.

Having spent a year as a slave herself, and not particularly inclined to discuss the topics of slavery, war, and the general hellishness of the world, Celaena was more than happy to stick to the broad, clean streets where they could pretend to be two young women on their way to spend obscene amounts of money.

Nehemia had already toured much of the city and disliked almost all of what she'd seen, but still indulged Celaena in a detour to walk past the Royal Theater, in going into her favorite bakeries and sweet-shops, and popping into a few bookstores. Unsurprisingly, by the time they reached Kavill's, the finest clothier in Rifthold, Celaena had spent a good chunk of her monthly salary as King's Champion.

That was another topic they'd agreed to ignore for the day.

The two young women paused outside the front of the shop, and Celaena ran an eye over the gilded woodwork wreathing the glass window. Two dresses were displayed—one a somewhat traditional blue ball gown, edged with gold and splashes of turquoise; the other a daring work of red velvet, long-sleeved and accented with midnight lace.

“Kavill’s,” Nehemia read on the ornate shop sign swinging in the breeze off the Avery River. The princess frowned at Celaena. “It’s very... fancy,” she said in Eyllwe.

Indeed, beyond the glass and the display, Celaena could see a cluster of well-dressed women offering advice to a companion showing off a potential purchase.

Celaena hid her own frown. They were supposed to have a private appointment. Not just for the safety of the princess, whose personal guards trailed behind them, but also to put Nehemia—who hated shopping and playing dress-up and anything ‘useless’—at some degree of ease.

“We’re a few minutes early, I think,” Celaena said. Nehemia was still frowning at the storefront. “We could pop into a tea shop if you want and—”

“No, no. My hands are frozen through,” Nehemia said, her gloved fingers curling into fists. “Let’s just go in and wait.”

It had been a month since Celaena had been appointed King’s Champion—a month during which she’d had to face all the hardships the position presented—but somehow the thought of walking into Kavill’s with an already ill-tempered Nehemia made even Celaena’s nerves fray. She already pitied Lee Kavill himself...and the other customers inside.

“Just remember,” Celaena said in Eyllwe as Nehemia walked to the green-painted door, “I’m Lillian Gordaina and I am just some—”

“Heiress in Rifthold, I know,” Nehemia finished without looking back at her, and walked inside.

Celaena followed after the princess, giving Nehemia’s two personal guards a nod as they moved into position: one by the storefront, the other going around the block to take up a spot by the back door. Once the appointment began, no one went in or out.

The lavender-and-mint smell inside Kavill’s was altogether familiar and foreign.

Familiar, for in the years Celaena had lived in Rifthold, this had been her preferred clothier. Foreign, for the year she’d spent in Endovier and the months

that she'd been in the glass castle had made everything from that past life into something strange and unknown.

Lee Kavill, whom Celaena had already visited twice since becoming the King's Champion, was standing by the gaggle of women before the dressing room curtains, his signature plain leather notebook in his arms and a glass pen in hand.

In his forties, Kavill was a decent-looking man, his clothes simple and elegant, despite some of the extravagant offerings in his shop. He was also quiet. Not shy, but calm. Balanced. He didn't fuss, and didn't push, and had an artist's eye for colors and cuts and changing trends.

But those very eyes went a little wide at the sight of them, darting between the gathered women and his one o'clock appointment.

Nehemia stopped just inside the door, but Celaena went a few steps further into the red-carpeted shop. Kavill was already before them by the time Celaena smiled and held out her hands.

"We're a little early," she said by way of greeting, "but we're more than happy to wait." She inclined her head to the green-and-gold circular divan in the front of the room—a place usually reserved for ladies-in-waiting, patient husbands, and bored children.

Kavill took her hands with a smile. His fingers were just as calloused as hers, though his calluses and scars came from years with needles and pins, not blades. "Marta said my one o'clock was an important guest, but I had no idea I'd receive such an honor." As he finished, he looked to Nehemia and bowed. "You are most welcome."

Of course he'd recognize the princess. While it was fairly easy for Celaena to blend in, there was no hiding who Nehemia was. Not because of her creamy dark skin, but because Nehemia carried herself like a princess.

No matter where they went or how they were dressed, Nehemia always had that angle to her head and a glint in her eye, as if she'd come out of the womb knowing royal blood flowed in her veins. As if she always wore an invisible crown. Celaena still wasn't sure if she envied or pitied the princess for it.

Nehemia gave a shallow nod of the head—as much respect as Kavill deserved,

if not more, given that he'd come from peasant stock and worked his way up.

"I can offer you my office to wait, if you'd prefer," Kavill said quietly, especially as some of the women by the dressing room curtains turned to examine the newcomers. "We shouldn't be more than a few minutes."

It was his step to the side that ultimately gave him away—gave away what he was trying to shield from them. And Celaena might have played along had Nehemia not noticed it, too.

The girl could have been from Fenharrow or Eyllwe with her tan skin, but it was the twin gold bracelets—manacles—around her wrists that marked her as a slave. Gold, chainless manacles that had been welded on—and would never come off.

"We can go somewhere else," Celaena said softly.

Nehemia just stared at the slave-girl, her face blank. The girl was dressed well, and looked well-fed, but the manacles, so horrifyingly beautiful, gleaming in the warm light...

The women were staring at them now, but the slave-girl kept her eyes down. Didn't even turn toward them. Celaena rotated her own wrists, a tinge of phantom pain going through the scars that marked where her own shackles—iron and scratched—had once been.

Celaena put a hand on Nehemia's elbow. "We can—"

"No," Nehemia said, looking away from the girl and giving Kavill a bland smile. "We shall wait. Please—return to your work," she said to him, and took a seat on the divan. Celaena slowly sat down beside her, and Nehemia flashed her a brighter smile.

Today, they had agreed when setting out, would just be about enjoying themselves—about letting Celaena dress Nehemia up. Today, they were just two ordinary, perfectly happy girls, out to do some shopping.

Celaena gave her best smile in return.

So Kavill went back to his customers, the soft-spoken Marta came to take their

cloaks and gloves and replaced them with jasmine tea, delicate cookies, and a selection of the day's papers.

"Such service," Nehemia said when Marta had slipped away to assist Kavill in taking down his measurements and seeing to the needs of their customers. The princess ran an eye around the gilded walls, the racks of sample gowns, the displays of jewelry, shoes, hats, and parasols. "Such wealth, too."

Celaena, who had been watching one of the women debate whether a quarter of an inch would make her neckline too daring, glanced at the princess. "If it makes you feel better, he's turned down positions as the royal tailor several times."

Nehemia raised a well-groomed brow, the gold jewelry she wore glinting in the light of the lily-shaped glass sconces. "I don't mean to be...difficult," Nehemia said in the common tongue, any trace of her fake, thick accent gone.

The accent, Celaena had learned, was just to deceive the royal court—to get them to think she was dimwitted, and make them speak more freely when they thought she couldn't understand. But Nehemia spoke better than the most refined of them. And she had been using the knowledge she'd gleaned to uncover any tidbits of maneuverings that might help the plight of her enslaved people.

It was why they had gone shopping in the first place: to find gowns that Queen Georgina would approve of—gowns to enable Nehemia to cozy up to the queen and her inner circle, to see if she might help Eyllwe by winning over the King of Adarlan's wife.

"Let's just enjoy ourselves," Celaena said, taking a long sip of her jasmine tea, almost groaning at the sheer perfection of it, then adjusting the folds of her forest-green gown. A piece that had been made in this very shop—a fact that she was certain Kavill had already noted.

The five other customers cast only a few curious glances their way before they finally left the shop in a flurry of fur cloaks, kidskin gloves, and moans about the endless winter. The slave girl never once looked up, and Celaena could have sworn that Nehemia's hand twitched when she walked by—as if the princess had contemplated reaching for the girl, and then thought better of it.

When they were at last gone, Marta shut the curtains on the front window, lit a few more sconces, and escorted them to the silk couches before the dressing

room curtains. Kavill himself bought them another ornate pot of jasmine tea, and then refilled both their cups.

After Celaena explained that Nehemia needed at least four dresses, two of them to be ball gowns, and all fit for Adarlanian royalty, Kavill crossed his arms behind his back and paced as he inquired after the colors and fabrics that Nehemia preferred or hated, about her feelings toward low or high necklines, how much mobility she desired, and on and on until Celaena started wondering if Nehemia would snap.

But the princess just smiled at the slender man, answering him with the thick, hesitant accent she used for everyone but Celaena. And then she patiently sat through Kavill and Marta's presentation of color, cloth, beading, and stitching. It wasn't until Kavill and Marta went into the back—to get a sample of the blue ball gown in the window—that the princess sagged slightly.

"I think I prefer just having the royal dressmaker bring me something," she said quietly. "This is truly what you—you enjoy doing?"

Celaena winced, but smiled. "When the mood strikes me, yes." And now that she had the king's gold burning a hole in her purse, she was more than happy to spend most of it. "I've always liked pretty things—dresses, jewelry, shoes... I suppose it's easy to dismiss it as frivolous, but a gown like the ones Kavill makes is art. It's art, and mathematics, and economics."

Nehemia's brows lifted and Celaena shrugged, but turned to point to the red velvet sheath dress in the window display.

"That gown in the window—think about how Kavill had to first come up with the design, then get the measurements just right to match the image in his head, then find the right vendor to supply the perfect red velvet and black lace. Think about where that velvet and lace came from—the velvet from the port in Meah, the lace from Melisande, the thread that holds the whole thing together from a spinner in Fenharrow. Think about where the dyes for the red and the black came from, too—think about all the people and places that had a hand in that dress coming together. It's like a map of the continent, and every part of it tells a story, and—" Celaena trailed off and snorted. "Well, map and story aside, it's also pretty as hell."

Nehemia chuckled quietly. "I think I'm beginning to understand. Though I

think you also just like to look better than everyone else, my friend.”

Celaena laughed, “I wish I could deny it.”

Nehemia grinned. “Don’t bother. It’s why I like you.”

Celaena’s heart tightened at that, her smile growing even wider.

Kavill and Marta came back out a moment later, and Marta ushered the princess into the dressing room to try on the blue ball gown. Getting Nehemia out of her clothes and into the sample gown would take a few minutes, so Celaena browsed the selection of gowns displayed in the shop.

A lavender gown trimmed with white lace caught her eye—and she paused to run a hand over the silk. “Such a gorgeous color,” she murmured, more to herself than Kavill, but he stepped up beside her.

“It’d bring out the color of your skin,” he observed, picking up the three-quarter length sleeve. “I could make these full-length, if you wanted it.”

She caught his glance at her hands—specifically, the scarring around her wrists and forearms from the shackles in Endovier.

In the castle, she didn’t need to pretend to be a courtier anymore, and certainly wasn’t ashamed of any of her scars, but... they did attract attention. And questions. Sleeves and high backs usually covered most of the damage of Endovier and ten years of training as an assassin—if only to avoid those questions. Or pitying looks.

“I’ll think about it,” she said, and moved to the red velvet dress in the window.

She knew Kavill well enough to understand he wouldn’t ask about the scars, no matter what he might suspect. She’d always wondered if he’d known who and what she really was—wondered about her relationship with the red-haired man who’d once accompanied her in here, keen to dote on his most talented pupil.

But Arobynn wasn’t a part of her life anymore, and the first time she’d come here since being appointed King’s Champion, Kavill hadn’t asked after him. Hadn’t asked where she’d been, either. It was why she’d decided to bring Nehemia to him, fine dresses aside. Kavill didn’t gossip—or pry.

But had he attempted to prevent them from seeing the slave girl for Nehemia's sake, or hers? She didn't want to know.

Nehemia emerged from the dressing room, already wincing, but Celaena beamed. Even Kavill let out a gasp of approval.

"Well, I'll be damned," Celaena said, putting a hand on her hip as she motioned for Nehemia to turn. "If you don't buy that, I'll never forgive you."

"It's...different," Nehemia said in the common tongue, facing Celaena again. "Perhaps something subtler—"

"Nonsense," Celaena cut in, shooing past Marta to adjust the dress herself. "You'll wear this to the next royal ball and make all the men pant after you." She cast a meaningful glance in the direction of Nehemia's ample bosom. "And don't you dare cover those up with a shawl."

Nehemia chuckled, switching to Eyllwe. "I'd never dare disobey a direct order from you."

Celaena grinned and replied in the common tongue. "Good. Then we'll get one of these." She turned to Kavill and Marta, who were standing quietly a few feet away, scribbling down measurement notes in Kavill's ledger. "Any thoughts on what jewelry might best accent this?"

Kavill opened his mouth, but Nehemia cut in using Eyllwe, "I have jewelry from Eyllwe."

"I don't think it'd match."

Nehemia straightened a bit and still said in Eyllwe, "I'd like some part of me to still remind people where I come from."

Their eyes met, and for a heartbeat, Celaena thought of the night Nehemia had come into her rooms after learning of the massacre of five hundred Eyllwe rebels. How the princess had wept for her people, for their helplessness, for their enslaved world.

It was for that world that Nehemia fought—why Nehemia would buy these dresses and play the part of the queen's confidante.

Perhaps Nehemia thought of the same thing, for the princess let out a long breath and said, “Maybe you are right, Elentiya.”

Celaena didn’t think Kavill or Marta would notice the name the princess had given her—but she glanced at them nonetheless. They were now just watching, faces bland but pleasant. Willing to get the jewelery and accessories at a moment’s notice. Nehemia turned to them and said in her perfectly false accent, “Show me your jewelry.”

And just like that, they went through another presentation of necklaces and earrings and bracelets, then gloves and brooches and hair ornaments. And when they had decided what looked best, Nehemia was measured and pinned some more, and then ushered into the next gown. And the next, and the next.

The clock was striking four by the time they’d decided on the gowns, jewelry, and accessories Nehemia would purchase. Marta had long since brought out steaming cups of tea to Nehemia’s guards outside. She’d come back looking a little pale-faced and shaken, but at least the teacups had been empty. Nehemia’s guards weren’t a chatty sort—and were nothing short of lethal.

Nehemia was shoveling cookies down her throat as Celaena again strolled through the shop, taking in the dresses. She’d already ordered the lilac and lace gown, and since Kavill had her most recent measurements, she hadn’t bothered to try it on, save for holding it against her torso to make sure she really did love the color and fabric.

She paused in front of the red velvet dress in the display, running a finger down the skirts. There were no petticoats with this sort of dress, no corsets—she’d never seen a dress like it, actually. Never even heard of a gown like it, with the open back coated in midnight black lace, the plunging neckline, and form-hugging bodice. It left little to the imagination—and would surely turn heads.

“You should try it on,” Nehemia said in Eyllwe from behind her, finishing her praline cookie. “You’ve been ogling it all day.”

Celaena looked over her shoulder, brows high. “It’s...a bit daring. People would be scandalized.”

The princess grinned. “Who better to wear it then?”

Celaena found herself grinning as well. “Who indeed?”

Thus, five minutes later, Celaena found herself wearing the sample gown before the three angled mirrors of the shop, slowly turning in place.

Daring and scandalous were just the start of it.

Nehemia let out an appreciative whistle from where she was sprawled on the divan. “The Captain won’t know what to do with himself.”

Celaena shot her a glare over a shoulder. “He’s not my concern.” Though she could almost imagine Chaol’s face at the sight of the gown: tight-lipped, wide-eyed, a bit confounded and more than a bit angry. She could almost hear him, too, the claims he’d make about the King’s Champion spending such exorbitant sums on little more than scraps of cloth, the reputation she had to uphold now that she was employed by the king... Oh, she should buy the dress, if only to piss Chaol off.

Nehemia approached, and Celaena stepped off the small platform. “What sort of story does this dress tell you?” the princess asked in Eyllwe.

Celaena was about to open her mouth, but she caught the direction of Nehemia’s stare: the open back. The black lace did a good job of hiding the gruesomeness of her scars, but this close, it was easy to see the mangled flesh beneath.

Their eyes met, and Celaena switched to Eyllwe as she said, “Do you think I should cover them up?”

Nehemia’s attention again went to the scars beneath the black lace. After a moment, she said, “No.” Celaena turned back to the mirror, but Nehemia spoke again, her voice a bit too calm: “How often do you think about them—about Endovier?”

Celaena met her own reflection in the mirror, the face that, like Kavill’s, was now familiar and foreign. “Every day. Every hour.”

It was a truth she hadn’t admitted to anyone—perhaps even to herself until now.

“Would you free them if you could?”

Celaena snapped her head to the princess. “What kind of a question is that? Of course I would.”

They had sworn—both sworn this morning—that they wouldn’t have this kind of talk. And Celaena knew precisely where this conversation would go: into Nehemia talking about slavery, the empire, the need for good people to stand and fight.

Kavill and Marta were doing their best to look busy at the counter in the rear of the front room. Kavill’s eyes lifted from his ledger, and when her gaze met his, she realized that he knew. He knew exactly who she was, and perhaps always had. She didn’t know why, but it made her...sad. Surprisingly, absurdly sad.

She looked back to the princess, who gave a forced smile. “I should not have mentioned it,” Nehemia said. “Today is for fun—for just being young women.”

And for some reason, seeing that forced smile just made the weight in her chest sink a little deeper.

Nehemia had gone to the front door to tell her guards that she was ready—and to find a carriage for hire. The sun had dropped, along with the temperature, and neither Celaena nor Nehemia felt particularly inclined to walk home in the frigid night.

Celaena was standing at the polished wooden counter, filling out directions on how and where to deliver Nehemia’s new clothes, and paying for her own purchases. She decided to take the red velvet gown, daring and scandalous as it was. If only because not buying it felt like some sort of defeat, some irreplaceable loss that cut her every time she thought about it.

She plucked the last piece of gold from her purse and set it on the counter, behind which Kavill stood, counting. “The red velvet gown should be ready in two weeks,” he said, taking the last piece of gold. “Do you have any special occasion in mind?”

She shrugged, glancing at Nehemia, who remained by the door, already looking miserable at the oncoming cold. Celaena herself wasn’t too keen to leave the warmth of the shop. She should have brought gloves—and a warmer cloak. “I’m

sure I'll find some use for the dress before summer."

Kavill nodded, and closed his thick ledger. "Do let me know if it causes anyone to faint—or start a riot."

She laughed under her breath, and turned to go, stuffing her hands into her pockets and praying her fingers didn't fall off on the way home.

"Here," Kavill said, and she turned to find a pair of exquisite dove-gray suede gloves in his hands. "On the house. For many years of loyal patronage." His face bore its usual mask of polite calm and courtesy, but his brown eyes were bright. "And a gift—for a year spent without any gloves at all."

Had she had any doubt before, there was no shred of it remaining now. He knew who and what she was, knew where she had spent a year enslaved—knew what kind of money she used to buy his dresses.

She had no words—none at all to do justice to the kindness of his gesture—so she merely nodded, took the gloves, and left.

The carriage wasn't much warmer than the outside. Celaena and Nehemia huddled together, cursing violently and rather creatively at the endless winter.

Nehemia's latest vulgar concoction sent Celaena into a fit of howling laughter, so loud that one of the guards riding atop the carriage thumped twice to ask if all was right. Nehemia thumped thrice to assure him all was fine, but Celaena kept laughing until her stomach hurt.

When silence fell again, she looked at her friend and wiped the tears of laughter from her eyes. "I'd pay good money to see you say that to Queen Georgina."

Nehemia chuckled, but it didn't quite reach her eyes. "Thank you, Elentiya, for helping me today. I—I needed the dresses. And to get out of the castle for a bit."

Celaena sobered, and nodded. They passed through wealthiest district, a blur of alabaster houses and emerald roofs, now iced over and gleaming in the lamplight. "Thank you for pretending. For one day, at least."

She felt Nehemia's eyes on her, but kept staring out at the wet streets, slick from a day of melting snow now turning to ice. After a while, Celaena asked, "Do you ever wonder what it'd be like if we truly were ordinary people?"

The princess chewed on her lip. "Sometimes."

"Do you ever wish you were? Ordinary, I mean."

Nehemia was quiet for a long moment, her eyes distant, as if she beheld some far-off land, warm and vibrant, its grasslands undulating under a hot summer sun. "It is my most selfish wish and daydream—to be normal, to be ordinary, to be free of my burdens."

She hadn't realized she'd been holding her breath, hadn't realized just how important Nehemia's answer was to her until she'd heard it. Celaena sighed. "And yet you and I couldn't even pretend for a single day to be free of those burdens."

"I'm sorry," Nehemia said quietly.

"What have you to be sorry for? It was a foolish demand to make of you, anyway."

"I wish you could have a normal friend—not a princess or a captain or the son of the king. But just a normal friend, living a good, calm life."

"I don't have an interest in normal friends. Even if I were just an ordinary girl, I wouldn't want to be surrounded by ordinary folk. No, I'll take the rebel princesses and the sons of kings and the grumpy captains and the whores and the thieves any day. And I'd take you over a thousand ordinary girls."

Nehemia's smile trembled—just enough that Celaena had to turn to the window before she felt the sting in her own eyes.

The carriage turned down an avenue, and the glass castle arose before them, greenish and glimmering in the night sky.

"I am glad we're not ordinary, Elentiya." Nehemia was smiling into the darkness of the carriage. "It'd be so boring if we were."

Celaena grinned. “Incredibly boring.”

“And, for what it’s worth, I’d pick you over a thousand ordinary and extraordinary friends. I think even if we just met on the street, even if I just saw you in passing, I’d know what you are.”

Celaena cocked her head to the side. “An assassin?”

Nehemia’s dark eyes were bright as she shook her head. “The sister of my heart.”

Celaena had to turn away. When she at last looked back, she didn’t know who reached for who, but a moment later, her hand was grasped tightly in Nehemia’s.

“I think I’d know, too,” Celaena said quietly, and leaned against her friend’s shoulder. Both smiling faintly, the assassin and the princess rode through the quieting city and into the glass castle beyond.